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SUBJECT: EAST JAVA: MUDFLOW UPDATE -- USGS EXPERT VISIT TO MUDFLOW SITE

REF: SURABAYA 37 AND PREVIOUS

SURABAYA 00000041 001.2 OF 002

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On September 20-22, USGS Geologist Thomas Casadevall and Surabaya Pol/Econ Officer toured the site of the Sidoarjo mud flow and met with Indonesian geologists familiar with the disaster. The site tour and subsequent meeting showed fundamental differences in focus between geologists associated with Lapindo Corporation and Dr. Surono, an influential government geologist, regarding the cause of the disaster. However, experts were unanimous regarding the current situation: the mud flow will likely be unstoppable for many years to come and resources will be best spent to permanently relocate affected residents. This USGS visit highlighted conflicting interests and political sensitivities plaguing disaster mitigation efforts on site. END SUMMARY.

An Overburdened River

¶2. (SBU) During his three-day visit to Sidoarjo and the surrounding area to view the impact of the mud flow on the region, USGS geologist Tom Casadevall toured the site of the mudflow, speaking with engineers employed by BPLS (the Sidoarjo Mudflow Disaster Management Board) about their efforts to mitigate the mudflow's impact. As noted reftels, the Porong River plays a key role in all current mitigation plans. Experts and residents have expressed concern about the river's ability to accommodate increased runoff during the rainy season in light of the ever-growing volume of mud entering the river. BPLS plans to install additional dredging equipment to push the mud sediment farther downstream.

¶3. (SBU) Casadevall and Pol/Econ Officer followed the course of the mud discharge along the Porong River for several miles towards the sea. Illustrating the mud's density, approximately two miles downstream, the tracks of a skiff used for transporting people and cargo across the river were clearly visible on the mud's surface. While the water's depth above the mud allowed for the skiff to cross, the river's flow had so far had no impact on the course of the tracks' straight line across

the river. While the current dry conditions are responsible for the river's weak flow rate, the mud's tendency to harden in water and the anticipated water volumes during the rainy season raise serious concerns about extensive flooding. The Porong river's role in flood control for Surabaya means any flooding would likely effect not only the surrounding river but also Indonesia's second largest city.

Political Faultlines, Priorities Mirrored At Site

14. (SBU) While BPLS is charged with managing the area surrounding the bubbling lagoon that is the source of the mud, the source itself and its dyke is the domain of PT Energy Mega Persada EMP (Lapindo's holding company). EMP/Lapindo's mud control operations go on around the clock. Questions of financing abound and little money appears to be going toward mud management and control. BPLS Director of Operations Soffian Hadi told Pol/Econ Officer that he has still not been paid since taking his position four months ago. Dr. Surono, Head of the Center Volcanology and Geological Hazard Mitigation in Bandung and the President's point man on recent earthquake and volcano disasters, reported that his Center had experienced a drastic budget cut this year.

Cause and Impact

15. (SBU) On 21 September, Casadevall and Pol/Econ Officer met with Dr Surono and experts employed by Lapindo at the BPLS offices in Surabaya. Dr. Surono, Agus Guntoro, from the Geology Faculty and Trisakti University, and Bambang Istadi, VP for Technical Services, PT Energy Mesa Persada (a Lapindo holding company), had flown from Jakarta especially to brief Casadevall. Despite repeated assurances from Surono and Casadevall that their interest was in efforts to mitigate the effects of the mud, Istadi and Guntoro made lengthy power-point presentations explaining why the seismic system was ultimately responsible for the mud flow. Indeed Guntoro demanded that Casadevall declare

SURABAYA 00000041 002.2 OF 002

his opinion regarding the causes of the disaster. Casadevall demurred and reiterated that the purpose of his trip was to focus on mitigation of the disaster not the causes.

16. (SBU) Information about the chemical content of the mud was conspicuously absent and clearly sensitive. Casadevall asked if mineralogy testing had been done several times only to be put off by vague answers. Istadi and Guntoro finally admitted that tests had been done, but that Lapindo was keeping the results confidential.. Istadi allowed Casadevall a brief look at his

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laptop computer which showed an Indonesian language list of the elements found in the mud. Seeing pyrite on the list, Casadevall voiced his concern that pyrite would produce damaging acidic runoff similar to that seen in coal mining operations. Acidic runoff would endanger the network of fishponds and rice fields downstream, compounding the environmental and economic impact of the mud. Casadevall took a mud sample provided by BPLS to the U.S. for further analysis.

Lapindo's Resettlement Plan

17. (SBU) Istadi offered Casadevall a glimpse of Lapindo's plan to resettle victims of the mud flow, but cautioned that premature release of the plans could have an impact on real estate prices in the Sidoarjo area. The plan involves Lapindo's purchase of land parcels straddling the toll road roughly halfway between Porong and Surabaya. Architectural drawings of "Satellite City -- New Sidoarjo" showed what Istadi said was "mixed use" housing, to include a golf course, high-rise buildings, and retail space in addition to three different home models. Those displaced by the mudflow would be offered the cheapest model home, he said, while the other homes

would be offered for sale to the general public. Istadi suggested that Lapindo had no intention of losing money on the real estate transaction, commenting "we can't just give all of this money to these people." Istadi added that the full plan was to have been rolled out during the President's June visit to Sidoarjo, but had been delayed because the plan was not yet "mature."

Requests made of USGS

18. (SBU) Tasked by President Yudhoyono to assess mitigation plans, Dr. Surono said he had reviewed the numerous proposals for relief wells and other options for shutting down the mudflow. He expressed concern to Casadevall that the costs associated with trying to stop the mudflow are prohibitively expensive with no guarantee of success or promise of prevention.

Casadevall suggested that a LIDAR study of the area would provide a precise topography of the area surrounding the site and the necessary foundation upon which to build any mitigation plan. A LIDAR study would allow experts to project the likely path of future flows from the current mud source, if it is allowed to flow naturally.

19. (SBU) Guntoro and Istadi made the following specific requests for USGS assistance:

- An expert on hydraulic properties of the mud.
- An expert to help BPLS collect and coordinate all previous reports on the mud.
- A drilling expert (This was a request from Istadi, EPM)
- An expert on mud volcanoes, particularly fossil mud volcano systems (a request from Agus Guntoro, Trisakti)

They said that experts from Russia, Italy and other nations had offered assistance, but thus far only in the form of shared research on mud volcanoes.

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